

Besieged Leningrad: Aesthetic Responses to Urban Disaster. By Polina Barskova. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017. 232 pp. \$49.00. ISBN 9780875807720.

Polina Barskova's fascinating new study of aesthetic responses to the Siege of Leningrad builds upon a number of recent studies, which examine this murderous and deeply traumatic event from a spatial perspective. Both Steven Maddox, in *Saving Stalin's Imperial City: Historic Preservation in Leningrad, 1930–1950*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 2015, and Alexis Peri in *The War Within: Diaries From the Siege of Leningrad*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, drew attention to how extreme hunger and material destruction reconfigured Leningraders' relation to space and their urban environment. Barskova advances the scholarship of the *blokada*, as it was known by contemporaries, by focusing on survivors' changing relationship and responses to this urban disaster. Unlike many of the populations which experienced the catastrophic events of the Second World War on the Eastern Front, siege inhabitants continued to live amidst the ruined city. 'Their ties within the city,' as Barskova writes, 'were broken but not demolished; they were doomed to continued contact with Leningrad while it underwent gradual but grave change.' (p. 3). Residents were forced to reconfigure their relationship with urban space, finding new ways to sense, imagine and move through it.

Social histories of the blockade have long created a deep impression of the almost unbearable and unimaginable horror of the siege experience, focusing on the enormous suffering created by extreme hunger, freezing temperatures, aerial bombardment, and mass death. However, Barskova's examination of a startling array of cultural texts, including visual materials and soundscapes, reveals that Leningraders frequently imagined and reimagined the besieged city both during and after this

traumatic experience. Far from being surrounded by silence, the siege became an, 'inexhaustible source of contemplation and writing,' (p. 4) that cultural figures picked over, 'devotedly, meticulously, and diversely.' (p. 5). Representing the harm done to the city and its people served important therapeutic functions. Experiments in new urban aesthetics became a means of witnessing events that were too painful for conventional languages to express; or as Barskova puts it, 'Siege writers thus used aesthetics as way to anesthetize the experience.' This new perspective on the Siege is underpinned by an extremely broad analysis of cultural figures and their writings. While some of the most familiar and influential Siege writers, such Olga Berggol'ts, Vera Inber, and Viktor Shklovsky, appear regularly throughout the book's six chapters, the focus on lesser-known individuals lends this study a freshness. Indeed, *Besieged Leningrad* contains some remarkable details, including that Leningraders wore fluorescent 'pin-fireflies', round-headed pins dipped in phosphorous, to identify each other in the dark (p. 78), that Peter the Great's grave was renovated in 1942, becoming a site for soldiers to swear military oaths (p. 122), and that Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens were avidly read during the Siege (pp. 159–60).

The book begins by examining how Leningraders navigated a changing cityscape on foot, and how new routes and patterns of movement shaped temporal and spatial modalities. This changing landscape was overlaid with familiar mnemonic topographies creating new relationships to urban space. Chapter two examines how the bodies of Leningraders were represented during the Siege, revealing the complex interplay between the depiction of emaciated bodies, and more ideologically acceptable heroic bodies. The focus in chapter three shifts to considering how new sensory relationships were figured in a city where electric light disappeared, and as siege blindness afflicted the chronically malnourished. Chapter four concerns itself with the strange paradox

that whilst traumatised Leningraders grappled with their emotional numbness, many continued to experience the profound beauty of the ruined and empty city. Here Barskova explores how a siege sublime came to coexist with emotional trauma. Finally, in chapters five and six the role of reading and books as cultural and material resources is discussed, revealing the wide range of literary models and inspirations available to siege intellectuals. What emerges overall is a sense of the variety of tropes and techniques available to represent the siege, and the extraordinary volume of creative work undertaken in extreme circumstances. As Barskova concludes, 'even in a situation of ultimate disaster, Leningrad created aesthetics of its own, a vast and complicated network of cultural representations of the Siege reality.' (p. 193).

This carefully researched work, then, makes an important contribution to the cultural history of the Siege, and contains much that will surprise readers. Its audience is primarily a specialist one. Those unfamiliar with scale of the disaster which befell Leningrad, especially in the winter of 1941–42, may have benefited from greater background information. Yet armed with that context, readers will learn much about how Leningrad intellectuals confronted their trauma.

Robert Dale

Dr Robert Dale

Postal Address:

(Until 30 September 2018): c/o: John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress, 101 Independence Ave SE, Washington, DC 20540-4860, United States of America.

(After 30 September 2018): School of History, Classics and Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Armstrong Building, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, United Kingdom.

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